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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 CHENGDU 000206

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STATE FOR EAP/CM AND DRL/IRF

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TAGS: [PGOV](#) [ECON](#) [PHUM](#) [CH](#)

SUBJECT: VIOLENCE FLARES ANOTHER YEAR AT LOCAL TIBETAN FESTIVAL

REF: A) 06 CHENGDU 925 B) CHENGDU 195

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CLASSIFIED BY: James Boughner, Consul General, Chengdu,
Department of State.
REASON: 1.4 (b), (d)

¶1. (C) Summary. Protests and arrests again marked the opening of a popular festival in Litang in western Sichuan's Ganzi Prefecture, with tensions between ethnic Tibetans and Han Chinese reportedly high. Travelers, local contacts, and the media also report sporadic violent incidents in other areas of Ganzi this summer, including several deaths. End summary.

LITANG FESTIVAL A FOCAL POINT FOR CONFLICT

¶2. (SBU) Litang's annual horse racing festival has been a popular draw for foreign and Chinese tourists over the last few years. Local government authorities schedule it for August 1, in an apparent effort to lend a patriotic air to the event (August 1 is the founding date of the People's Liberation Army). However, the race also brings large numbers of Khampa Tibetans, traditionally renowned for their toughness and fighting skills, from all corners of the plateau into what is a relatively small town. Khampa Tibetans led the 1956 and 1959 rebellions against central government rule and the annual Litang event is a potential flash point for outbreaks of violence. CG attended last year's race, which was cancelled halfway through after a rock-throwing confrontation between local residents (upset over the judging of one of the races) and police (ref A) led to shots being fired over the heads of an angry crowd.

¶3. (C) Travelers returning from the Litang area in recent days told us that tensions between local Tibetans and Han Chinese appear to be on the rise. According to those travelers, pictures of the Dalai Lama were on prominent display throughout Litang. One Amcit reported seeing a Tibetan snap a Chinese flag off a motorcycle and toss it onto the ground. A Han traveler saw a Tibetan beating a Han man after a traffic altercation and then taking his motorcycle, while a crowd of Tibetans looked on.

¶4. (C) Those travelers also said that local authorities had originally announced the festival would be called off this year

(apparently due to concerns over the potential for violence), but residents and leaders of area monasteries had decided to hold the festival without official permission. As a result of the announcement and the atmosphere of unrest, the travelers decided to return to Chengdu.

15. (SBU) It is possible that faced with a festival on their hands anyway, local officials decided to let the race proceed. In any event, media reports indicated that on August 1, during the event's opening ceremonies, a Tibetan man (identified as a nomad) took the stage and seized the microphone from the master of ceremonies. He then proceeded to shout slogans calling for Tibetan independence and for the return of the Dalai Lama. According to those reports, local police arrested the man shortly thereafter, which in turn led to an unruly demonstration by residents outside the place of detention.

16. (C) Consulate's LES Political Assistant (an ethnic Tibetan) contacted a number of Litang residents by telephone August 2 to confirm the reports. Most were unwilling to discuss the matter: "Something serious happened yesterday, but it's not convenient to talk about it." However, one contact said, "The government decided to cancel the festival again, but the local people and monasteries didn't listen, and started without official permission. A clash between Tibetans and armed forces then followed, with some Tibetans being detained." Another local contact reported that during the opening ceremonies, "A local Tibetan shouted 'Tibetan independence' to the crowd, followed by 'the Dalai Lama must be permitted to return,' and 'the Chinese government must release the real Panchen Lama.'" According to that contact, the slogans received a "warm response" from the crowd.

ILLEGAL BUSES AND CATERPILLAR FUNGUS

17. (C) Travelers from Ganzi have also returned to Chengdu with reports of violence in the town of Daocheng, about two hours

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away from Litang by car. There, no pictures of the Dalai Lama were to be seen, but instead posters of Chairman Mao decorated the town, and the streets were unusually quiet. Locals told the travelers the town was under a form of "lockdown" following violent strife between ethnic Tibetans and government officials, sparked by a crackdown on illegal taxis and buses. One resident alleged 17 people had been killed in three to four hours of fighting, and that locals had used guns and hand grenades against the authorities. No independent verification of this event could be obtained.

18. (C) International media have also carried stories about violent conflicts in Ganzi Prefecture in recent weeks between groups of Tibetans over the right to collect caterpillar fungus (Ch: chong cao), an ingredient used in Chinese traditional medicine. Those reports indicated that in one such clash, six people were killed and more than 110 injured (ref B). Travelers indicated that they had also heard stories about such clashes from Tibetan residents of Litang and Daocheng.

19. (C) Comment: Prior to the reports of unrest, CG and Econoff have already submitted a diplomatic note to the Sichuan FAO, seeking permission to make a weeklong visit to Ganzi Prefecture. In the event that such permission is granted, Post will attempt to gather further information about the conflicts. End comment.
BOUGHNER